

NCCIC Is a Service of the Child Care Bureau

10530 Rosehaven Street, Suite 400 • Fairfax, VA 22030 • Phone: 800-616-2242
Fax: 800-716-2242 • Email: info@nccic.org • Web: <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov>

RECOGNIZING AND DEALING WITH CONFLICT¹

Conflict occurs when individuals or groups are not obtaining what they need or want and are seeking their own self-interest. Sometimes the individual is not aware of the need and unconsciously starts to act out. Other times, the individual is very aware of what he or she wants and actively works at achieving the goal.

About conflict:

- Conflict is inevitable;
- Conflict develops because we are dealing with people's lives, jobs, children, pride, self-concept, ego and sense of mission or purpose;
- Early indicators of conflict can be recognized;
- There are strategies for resolution that are available and DO work;
- Although inevitable, conflict can be minimized, diverted, and/or resolved.

Beginnings of conflict:

- Poor communication
- Power seeking
- Dissatisfaction with management style
- Lack of leadership
- Lack of openness
- Change in leadership.

Conflict indicators:

- Body language
- Disagreements, regardless of issue
- Withholding bad news
- Surprises
- Strong public statements
- Airing disagreements through media
- Conflicts in value system
- Desire for power
- Increasing lack of respect
- Open disagreement
- Lack of candor on budget problems or other sensitive issues
- Lack of clear goals
- No discussion of progress, failure relative to goals

¹ Adapted from National School Boards Foundation (1998). *Dealing with conflict*. Education Leadership Toolkit. Alexandria, VA: Author. www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Conflict.html

Conflict is destructive when it:

- Takes attention away from other important activities;
- Undermines morale or self-concept;
- Polarizes people and groups, reducing cooperation;
- Increases or sharpens differences;
- Leads to irresponsible and harmful behavior, such as fighting, name-calling.

Conflict is constructive when it:

- Results in clarification of important problems and issues;
- Results in solutions to problems;
- Involves people in resolving issues important to them;
- Causes authentic communication;
- Helps release emotion, anxiety, and stress;
- Builds cooperation among people through learning more about each other;
- People join in resolving the conflict;
- Helps individuals develop understanding and skills.

Techniques for avoiding and/or resolving conflict:

- Meet conflict head on
- Set goals
- Plan for and communicate frequently
- Be honest about concerns
- Agree to disagree - understand healthy disagreement would build better decisions
- Set individual ego aside - develop management style apart from ego
- Let your team create - people will support what they help create
- Discuss differences in values openly
- Continually stress the importance of following policy
- Communicate honestly
- Provide more data and information than is needed
- Develop a sound management system

Resolving conflict:

Searching for the causes of conflict is essential to be successful in resolving the conflict. Consider the possible causes of conflict:

- Conflict with self
- Needs or wants are not being met
- Values are being tested
- Perceptions are being questioned
- Assumptions are being made
- Knowledge is minimal
- Expectations are too high/too low
- Personality, race, or gender differences are present

Resolving conflict and reaching consensus through collaboration

The ability to use collaboration requires the recognition of and respect for everyone's ideas, opinions, and suggestions. Consensus requires that each

participant must agree on the point being discussed before it becomes a part of the decision. Not every point will meet with everyone's complete approval. Unanimity is not the goal. The goal is to have individuals accept a point of view based on logic. When individuals can understand and accept the logic of a differing point of view, you must assume you have reached consensus.

Follow these guidelines for reaching consensus:

- Avoid arguing over individual ranking or position. Present a position as logically as possible.
- Avoid "win-lose" statements. Discard the notion that someone must win.
- Avoid changing of minds only in order to avoid conflict and to achieve harmony.
- Avoid majority voting, averaging, bargaining, or coin flipping. These do not lead to consensus. Treat differences of opinion as indicative of incomplete sharing of relevant information, keep asking questions.
- Keep the attitude that holding different views is both natural and healthy to a group.
- View initial agreement as suspect. Explore the reasons underlying apparent agreement and make sure that members have willingly agreed.